

Key Messages on Human Rights and Climate Change

Climate change impacts, directly and indirectly, an array of internationally guaranteed human rights. States (duty-bearers) have an affirmative obligation to take effective measures to prevent and redress these climate impacts, and therefore, to mitigate climate change, and to ensure that all human beings (rights-holders) have the necessary capacity to adapt to the climate crisis.

Climate justice requires that climate action is consistent with existing human rights agreements, obligations, standards and principles. Those who have contributed the least to climate change unjustly and disproportionately suffer its harms. They must be meaningful participants in and primary beneficiaries of climate action, and they must have access to effective remedies.

OHCHR's Key Messages on Human Rights and Climate Change highlight the essential obligations and responsibilities of States and other duty-bearers (including businesses) and their implications for climate change-related agreements, policies, and actions. In order to foster policy coherence and help ensure that climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts are adequate, sufficiently ambitious, non-discriminatory and otherwise compliant with human rights obligations, the following considerations should be reflected in all climate action.

- 1. To mitigate climate change and to prevent its negative human rights impacts:** States have an obligation to respect, protect, fulfil and promote all human rights for all persons without discrimination. Failure to take affirmative measures to prevent human rights harms caused by climate change, including foreseeable long-term harms, breaches this obligation. The Fifth Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change confirms that climate change is caused by anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases. Among other impacts, climate change negatively affects people's rights to health, housing, water and food. These negative impacts will increase exponentially according to the degree of climate change that ultimately takes place and will disproportionately affect individuals, groups and peoples in vulnerable situations including, women, children, older persons, indigenous peoples, minorities, migrants, rural workers, persons with disabilities and the poor. Therefore, States must act to limit anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases (e.g. mitigate climate change), including through regulatory measures, in order to prevent to the greatest extent possible the current and future negative human rights impacts of climate change.
- 2. To ensure that all persons have the necessary capacity to adapt to climate change:** States must ensure that appropriate adaptation measures are taken to protect and fulfil the rights of all persons, particularly those most endangered by the negative impacts of climate change such as those living in vulnerable areas (e.g. small islands, riparian and low-lying coastal zones, arid regions, and the poles). States must build adaptive capacities in vulnerable communities, including by recognizing the manner in which factors such as discrimination, and disparities in education and health affect climate vulnerability, and by devoting adequate resources to the realization of the economic, social and cultural rights of all persons, particularly those facing the greatest risks.
- 3. To ensure accountability and effective remedy for human rights harms caused by climate change:** The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and other human rights instruments require States to guarantee effective remedies for human rights violations. Climate change and its impacts, including sea-level rise, extreme weather events, and droughts have already inflicted human rights harms on millions of people. For States and communities on the frontline, survival itself is at stake. Those affected,

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now and in the future, must have access to meaningful remedies including judicial and other redress mechanisms. The obligations of States in the context of climate change and other environmental harms extend to all rights-holders and to harm that occurs both inside and beyond boundaries. States should be accountable to rights-holders for their contributions to climate change including for failure to adequately regulate the emissions of businesses under their jurisdiction regardless of where such emissions or their harms actually occur.

4. **To mobilize maximum available resources for sustainable, human rights-based development:** Under core human rights treaties, States acting individually and collectively are obligated to mobilize and allocate the maximum available resources for the progressive realization of economic, social and cultural rights, as well as for the advancement of civil and political rights and the right to development. The failure to adopt reasonable measures to mobilize available resources to prevent foreseeable human rights harms caused by climate change breaches this obligation. The mobilization of resources to address climate change should complement and not compromise other efforts of governments to pursue the full realization of all human rights for all including the right to development. Innovative measures such as carbon taxes, with appropriate safeguards to minimize negative impacts on the poor, can be designed to internalize environmental externalities and mobilize additional resources to finance mitigation and adaptation efforts that benefit the poorest and most marginalised.
5. **International cooperation:** The UN Charter, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and other human rights instruments impose upon States the duty to cooperate to ensure the realization of all human rights. Climate change is a human rights threat with causes and consequences that cross borders; thus, it requires a global response, underpinned by international solidarity. States should share resources, knowledge and technology in order to address climate change. International assistance for climate change mitigation and adaptation should be additional to existing ODA commitments. Pursuant to relevant human rights principles, climate assistance should be adequate, effective and transparent, it should be administered through participatory, accountable and non-discriminatory processes, and it should be targeted toward persons, groups, and peoples most in need. States should engage in cooperative efforts to respond to climate-related displacement and migration and to address climate-related conflicts and security risks.
6. **To ensure equity in climate action:** The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, and 'The Future We Want' all call for the right to development, which is articulated in the UN Declaration on the Right to Development, to be fulfilled so as to meet equitably the developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change calls for States to protect future generations and to take action on climate change "on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities". While climate change affects people everywhere, those who have contributed the least to greenhouse gas emissions (i.e. the poor, children, and future generations) are those most affected. Equity in climate action requires that efforts to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change should benefit people in developing countries, indigenous peoples, people in vulnerable situations, and future generations.
7. **To guarantee that everyone enjoys the benefits of science and its applications:** The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states that everyone has the right to enjoy the benefits of science and its applications. All States should actively support the development and dissemination of new climate mitigation and adaptation technologies including technologies for sustainable production and consumption. Environmentally clean and sound technologies should be accessibly priced, the cost of their development should be equitably

shared, and their benefits should be fairly distributed between and within countries. Technology transfers between States should take place as needed and appropriate to ensure a just, comprehensive and effective international response to climate change. States should also take steps to ensure that global intellectual property regimes do not obstruct the dissemination of mitigation and adaptation technologies while at the same time ensuring that these regimes create appropriate incentives to help meet sustainable development objectives. The right of indigenous peoples to participate in decision making related to and benefit from the use of their knowledge, innovations and practices should be protected.

8. **To protect human rights from business harms:** The United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights affirm that States have an obligation to protect human rights from harm by businesses, while businesses have a responsibility to respect human rights and to do no harm. States must take adequate measures to protect all persons from human rights harms caused by businesses; to ensure that their own activities, including activities conducted in partnership with the private sector, respect and protect human rights; and where such harms do occur to ensure effective remedies. Businesses are also duty-bearers. They must be accountable for their climate impacts and participate responsibly in climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts with full respect for human rights. Where States incorporate private financing or market-based approaches to climate change within the international climate change framework, the compliance of businesses with these responsibilities is especially critical.
9. **To guarantee equality and non-discrimination:** States have committed to guarantee equality and non-discrimination. Efforts to address climate change should not exacerbate inequalities within or between States. For example, indigenous peoples' rights should be fully reflected in line with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and actions likely to impact their rights should not be taken without their free, prior and informed consent. Care should also be taken to ensure that a gender perspective, including efforts to ensure gender equality, is included in all planning for climate change mitigation and adaptation. The rights of children, older persons, minorities, migrants and others in vulnerable situations must be effectively protected.
10. **To ensure meaningful and informed participation:** The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other human rights instruments guarantee all persons the right to free, active, meaningful and informed participation in public affairs. This is critical for effective rights-based climate action and requires open and participatory institutions and processes, as well as accurate and transparent measurements of greenhouse gas emissions, climate change and its impacts. States should make early-warning information regarding climate effects and natural disasters available to all sectors of society. Adaptation and mitigation plans should be publicly available, transparently financed and developed in consultation with affected groups. Particular care should be taken to comply with relevant human rights obligations related to participation of persons, groups and peoples in vulnerable situations in decision-making processes and to ensure that adaptation and mitigation efforts do not have adverse effects on those that they should be protecting. Human rights impact assessments of climate actions should be employed to ensure that they respect human rights. Further, States should develop and monitor relevant human rights indicators in the context of climate change, keeping disaggregated data to track the varied impacts of climate change across demographic groups and enabling effective, targeted and human rights compliant climate action.